[Personal History of Mike Pelletier]

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PERSONAL HISTORY OF MIKE PELLETIER, FRENCH CANADIAN

PULP AND PAPER MILL WORKER

Mike Pelletier, 66 years old, was born in Old Town, Maine in 1873. His father was born in St. Herbert, Quebec. The latter came to Old Town in 1865. Mike has a wife and 13 children; 8 boys and 5 girls. The girls are all married. The youngest boy, who works in a CCC camp, in the only one of the children not married. Albert worked as a weaver in the woolen mill for a long time. When that shut down he obtained work as a spare hand in the mill where his father works. One boy works in a filling station in Berlin, N.H. One works in a filter plant in Pittsburg, Pa. Another works in a plant that makes varnish out in some mid-western state. One, I think he said, was a mail clerk in Pittsfield, Mass. Mike has lived in Old Town all his life and on the same street. Mike started in at the public school at the age of 5 in 1878, and transferred to the convent school in 1885. Finished his school education two years later in 1887. Thus he went to school 9 years and stopped just short of the high school. He is, however, a very well read man, and could pass for a well educated person. Mr. Pelletier worked on the boom for one reason after he finished school in 1837 and that fall when the boom closed he went to work in the Great Works pulp mill where he has worked ever since. Mike is a Catholic. He is about 5 feet 10 inches tall and probably weighs 185 pounds, has good teeth, thick gray hair parted on one side, and is one of those fortunate men who never lose the enthusiasms of youth. He is a very interesting talker, is 66 years old, but looks to be 50 and acts as though he were 30. Both he and his wife look as though they get a lot of honest enjoyment out of living. Mike is the kind of man you would call by his first name (Mike). ?

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Mike Pelletier is a remarkably keen minded man and such a rapid talker that it is quite a tack to remember all he says. Once he gave me so many figures and dates all at once that I had to ask him to go over them again slowly so that I could get them down. A stenographer would surely be a great help in interviewing him.

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A VISIT TO THE HOME OF MIKE PELLETIER, FRENCH CANADIAN

PULP AND PAPER MILL WORKER

Mr. Pelletier's home sits very near the road - in fact I was told once that his sun porch [was?] really on city property, and that if the city wished to widen the streets he could be compelled to remove the porch. The houses sit close together there with only driveways between, but the lots, which run back quite a ways, have plenty of space for gardens. The house is a story and a half in height. It is well painted and is in excellent repair. Hardwood floors inside covered with thick rugs. The rooms are very neat and clean and are well furnished. There is a wide davenport in the living room, two tables, two floor lamps, four or five chairs, and a piano. An accordian rested on the floor near the piano. Because the davenport was against the hall door of the living room we had to go through a long hall, into the kitchen, and back again through another door into the front room. In the kitchen were Mrs. Pelletier, a daughter who has been separated from her husband, and a boarder named Bill Rioux. Rioux, an old acquaintance of mine, is a French Canadian who worked for a long time in the woolen mill. He hasn't worked since the mill shut down, but people say he was always a saving person and can afford to loaf the rest of his life.

I had gone over to call on Mr. Pelletier in the afternoon, but as I [?] the house, Rioux, who was just leaving, told me that Mr. Pelletier, who works by night this week, was asleep. As Rioux and I walked back down the street I told him something of the work I am doing and asked him if he thought Mr. Pelletier would be willing to tell me a story.

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“Sure he would,” said Rioux. “He'd be glad to and you couldn't run across a better man to tell you what you want to know.” * * * *

“While Mike and I were talking that night he apologized and jumped up to leave the room.

“I'll have to go down and close up that furnace,” he said, “or it'll drive us out of the room.” He said he used coal in the furnace and oil in a kitchen range.

When he came back from the cellar he said, “My wife asked me who you were. She said she had seen you somewhere, but couldn't exactly place you. I told her she ought to know you - Bob Grady.”

I know Albert, one of the boys, and a daughter, Flora, by sight, but to the best of my knowledge I had never seen either Mr. Pelletier or his wife before that night. As I hadn't mentioned my name I wondered if the man had clairvoyant power, and out of curiosity I asked him how he knew my name.

“Know your name?” he replied. “I've known you ever since you were born in that house your father built over on Perkins Avenue. I knew your father, Nick, too. He worked down there in Great Works on the filters. Nick and I and the Hunts - you remember them - were about the only people who lived down this way once. Yes indeed, I know you all right.”

Mike said he'd be glad to have me call again, but he didn't think he'd have the opportunity to talk until next Monday afternoon (the 30th). He said he'd be working from 6 a.m. to 12 noon that week and would have plenty of time in the afternoons and evenings. Friday evening of this week (th 27th) he said he had to attend a reception of honor of his granddaughter who is to marry a chap named Coffin. This Coffin, who also works in the pulp mill, became a Catholic in order to marry the girl. Because of the larger number of guests the 3 reception will be held in the K of P hall. He mentioned some activities he would be engaged in that would prevent him from granting me an interview Saturday or Sunday evening. I think he said he had to attend a lodge meeting Saturday. I told him that the later date would suit me perfectly because I had to write up the interview.

“That's okay, then,” he said. “You whip that into shape, and we'll get together again next week.”

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THE LIFE OF MIKE PELLETIER, FRENCH CANADIAN

(EXTRACTION), PULP AND PAPER MAKER

MIKE: “My father lived on a farm in Canada. He came to Old Town from St. Herbert, Quebec, in 1865. The first place he worked was in a sawmill in Veazie that was owned by General Samuel Veazie who built the old Veazie Railroad between Bangor and Old Town. That Veazie road (he refers to the street now known as Perkins Avenue along which the railroad run, long after the tracks were torn up the throughfare was known as the “Veazie Railroad”), was twenty feet higher than it is now when the railroad ran along there. It was much narrower at the top and wide enough only for the rails. The rails in those days were known as “strap rails,” and they were made of wooden timbers with strips of iron nailed on the tops. After the rails were taken up they cut down the road bed to its present level and used the dirt to fill in around that part of the town where you live (South Brunswick Street). That used to be low and swampy there. Down here where my father lived (Pine Street) was practically in the woods. There used to be drifts down here some winters fifteen feet high, and the only way they could get uptown was to use [skits?] or snowshoes.

“Father couldn't speak English very well when he landed in Old town. The French Canadians never had any trouble getting jobs around here, though. There were a lot of French to help them out with the language, and a lot of the bosses were French. They got $1.50 a day in the saw mills in those days, and they had to work fifteen hours a day. There weren't any lodges or societies around here then - not for the French, anyway. After a man had worked fifteen hours a day about all he felt like joining was a matress. There was no labor 2 saving machinery in sawmills then, you understand all the work was muscular. Nowadays logs are fed to the gang saws by automatic feed rolls, but in the old time saw mills they had to be “spudded” against the saws. They had to get their shoulders against the spuds and push for all they were worth. (The “spuds” sometimes used in woods work now are probably the same as those referred to by Mr. Pelletier. They are used in place of

cant dogs and are sections of tree trunks varying in diameter in proportion to the service they must render. They are used as prys and may be anywhere from two to four inches in diameter.)

“They used rotary saws to cut dimension (2x4, 4x4, etc), and [?] and single saws to cut boards. The single saws were also known as ‘muleys.’ The gang saws and the muleys were vertical saws that run up and down. They were moved by a wooden arm and crank arrangement that got its power from a water wheel. The lumber they sawed in those mills might have been used anywhere - across the road or across the ocean. It was sold to any one who wanted to buy it no matter where he was located.

“The people who worked fifteen hours a day in those saw mills had blame little time or inclination to plant gardens, as you can well imagine. Twenty five or thirty years later, when they had to work only ten or twelve hours, they began to raise a little garden stuff.

“Wages were low then, but so wee living expenses. You could get a rent for from three to five dollars a month. $2.25 paid for a cord of four foot wood, or you could go out here and cut stumpage for 35 cents a cord. You could get a barrel of flour for three or three and a half, and a quarter of beef or pork at four and a half cents a pound. The way those fellows did was to buy a lot of provisions to 3 last them through the winter, and if they didn't want to go to the woods, they could sit back and smoke their pipes until spring with the chance that they could pick uppa few odd jobs here and there while they were waiting for the mills to open in the spring. They would be broke when the winter was over, but they wouldn't owe anything - at least not very much - and they knew a job was in the offing.

“The diseases they had in those days were about the same as we have now, but the doctors had different names for them. Appendicitis used to be called ‘inflammation of the bowels,’ and if you got that there was slim chance for you. Doctors have [more?] knowledge now than they formerly had, and we don't have the severe epidemics of cholera and black dyptheria that used to carry away so many. Jim Portier, [who?] used to live

over here, lost six children in a week because of black dyptheria. There was an epidemic of small pox in Old Town forty years ago. They had a [post?] house out where the old trotting park used to be. The last epidemic of large proportions that we had here occurred about the time of the influenza epidemic during the World War. There wasn't a great many deaths then, but it's safe to say that if it had happened sixty years ago, ten times as many people would have died. The doctors have a lot of long names that nobody can understand for diseases now, but when you come to think of it medicine has come a long way in the span of a lifetime. Hundreds of children wouldn't die now because of an epidemic, and a case of appendicitis wouldn't be pronounced incurable.

“That church on Water Street was moved up there from Great Works in 1870, and that was all of ten years before Father Trudel arrived. Father o'Brien was the priest here then. (Father Oullette said he “thought there was an Irish priest here about that time.”) Nicoli and Bapst were two other early priests. Nicoli, Bapst, and o'Brien, 4 had more than one parish to look after. Sometimes they had to go as far up as Millinocket. Father Trudel did it, too. It was Trudel who built the piece on [the?] front end of that church. He christened me, too.

“If that convent had been there when I started to go to school my parents would probably have sent me there, but that place was put up only fifty-four years ago. I was one of the first scholars there, but I attended it only two years. By that time I had graduated from the grammar grades.

“After I left school I worked on the boom [until?] it closed in the fall. That was in 1887. I rafted logs all summer for fifty cents a day. A boom is a long line of logs tied or chained securely together end to end. The ends of such a boom may be tied to piers or to some point on the shore. A boom like this might have fifty different uses. It could be used to guide logs toward a mill pond, or to keep them from drifting out after they got there. However when people used to talk of working on the boom they didn't mean a line of logs like that. By the way a ‘main boom,’ or double boom, was made to two lines of logs wedged together so that a man wouldn't have to be an expert to be able to walk along

it. A boom that run along the shore was called a 'shore boom' or shore logs. What I was going to say was that the boom at Pea Cove was operated by the Penobscot Log Driving Association. Logs were floated down stream from the woods during the spring drives and trapped in a jam at Pea Cove. Those logs were all marked with the owners special marks, and the job at the boom was to sort out those logs and [ra t?] raft the different marks together. The small 'joints' were combined in long rafts and floated down from the boom to the mills of the various owners. You might start down river to Bangor with a long raft, but if some of the logs were for mills in Old Town or Orono, all you had to do 5 was kick out the wedges while the raft was floating along and shove the proper joints over to where the mill boom would guide them to where they were supossed to go. The gaps in the main raft would be pulling the sections together." R.G. "By the way, Mike, the boss asked me the other day what a 'dingle' was, and I told him it was where they kept the horses in the woods. Later on I thought that was wrong. What about it?" Mike: "If you'd ever taken horses to the dingle and left them all night, the boss would have explained what it was the next morning. A dingle is a storehouse for meats and provisions. You were thinking about the 'hovel.' The [wangan?] was a kind of little store where tobacco, socks, mittens, thread, and stuff like that was sold. The timekeeper, was also the clerk of the wangan, slept there, and there was always a spare bunk for the main boss. The cook and the [?] had bunks in the cook room where the crew ate their meals, and the blacksmith and the saw filer, the cook, the head chopper, the timekeeper, and the scaler felt superior to the common woodsmen, but if they were good fellows they tried not to show it. If a man was good, though, he was always respected no matter what he worked at.

"When I quit work on the boom - or rather when it closed - I got a job in the pulp mill in Great Works. That was fifty-two years ago and I've been there ever since. I worked in the yard for five years and on the chipper for one year before I went inside. That mill was a pretty small place then compared to what it is now." R.G. "Some one told me you helped to build the foundations of that mill."

Mike: “No, I didn't. They must have got me mixed with some one else. But I know quite a lot about it just the same. There were some of us standing around down there one day when Clapp was there. He was the owner of the mill and a millionaire several times over. He was looking at a dryer and he says to Wentworth (the superintendent), ‘I wish I could remember how long this dryer has been in here. I suppose I'll have to get them to go through the records in Boston to find out.’

“There's no need of going to that bother, Mr. Clapp,’ I says, 'that dryer was put in there in the summer of [18 9?].’

“H-m-m,’ Clapp says. “You seem pretty sure of your facts young man.’

“Yes sir,’ I says, and I went on to tell him how long it took them to set the dryer up, who the boss of the crew was, and what they said it cost to do the work.

‘Gosh, ‘Clapp says, 'there's no need of keeping records as long as you stay here.’

“I told him a lot more about different things in the mill, he wanted to know about and he copied it all down in a book. After that whenever he wanted to know anything about the place, he always came to me.

“There was a News reporter [?] there last summer. Wentworth was showing him through the mill and they stopped in the evaporating room where I was at work. You must remember reading that interview in the News. That ‘grissled veteran' that the reporter spoke about was me.”

(I couldn't remember the interview when Mr. Pelletier mentioned it, but later I did. It was an account by Henry Burton of an interview with Walter Wentworth, and it must have occurred late in June or early in July. I remembered it particularly because a week or two afterward I interviewed Mr. Wentworth at his home to get some material for the 7 “Laxison of Trade Jargon” assignment, and Buxton's interview was mentioned. Wentworth was amused by

Buxton's reference to the “horse and buggy days.” Mr. Wentworth is a familiar figure on Old Town's streets where he may often be seen sitting primly erect in his buggy while an employee, who drives hi him to and from the mill, holds the reins.)

“Wentworth says to me, “How long have you worked her, Mike?”

‘Fifty one years, sir,’ I says.

‘Well, well,’ the reporter says, 'that doesn't look as though they fire people who are over forty five here!’ R.G. “I thought I had heard of all the rooms in that mill the evaporating room is one I can't place. What do they do there?” Mike: “Well that is where the water in taken out of the liquor that has been used in the digesters. When that reporter (Buxton) was in there last summer Wentworth asked me to show him some of the water that w s removed. I dipped some out in a dipper and handed it to the reporter.

‘Why,’ he says, ‘it looks clear enough to drink. Do you mean to say this water came from that black liquid down there?’

‘Yes sir,’ I says, 'the water has to be taken out before we can burn what is left.’

“That liquor is made up in the soda room and pumped to the digesters where it changes the wood chips into pulp. From the digesters the liquor goes to the wash room, then to the evaporating room and back to the soda room where it is used over again. You see it keeps going around and around. During the evaporating process the carbon is burned out of the liquor and the liquid that runs out of there to go back to the soda room looks just like molten lead.

“That work used to be done [in?] the three large rotary burners. (I remember now seeing those burners. The three of them, one next to 8 the other, were individually as large as - or larger than the bodies of large freight locomotives. They were heated by coal fires

underneath, and they were always revolving. The burning liquor appeared inside as a white hot, molten [?]. I always thought they were rotary furnaces.)

“Last winter they installed a new ty p type burner that replaced the three old rota rys . That new burner cost a quarter of a million dollars and it saves the company $5000.00 a week in operating costs. It produces 40,000 pounds of steam in an hour, so you can see there is quite a saving right there. In this new burner the fuel used is the liquor itself and that saves in fuel cost. It is only the carbon in the liquor that burns. The rest of it goes back, as I said, to be used over.” ies (?)

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Mike: “Let's see, the first time you were here I told you my father came to Old Town from Quebec in 1865, but I didn't tell you how he came. He and his wife and their fourteen children came down from St. Herbert in a covered wagon something like the ones used by the old forty niners. It was hooped and covered with canvas. You used to see one of those around here once in a while. They came down through River du Loup, Edmundston, and Madawaska.

“I was three months old when my father moved over here to Pine Street. When you came over here tonight the road had been plowed [?] down almost to its surface and so had the sidewalk: you didn't have to wade through snow. In the old days there was no sidewalk and sometimes the snow was six or eight feet deep on the level. More than once I've seen my father come up that road dragging a homemade sled on which he had a barrel of flour. He hauled it all the way from uptown. The road was narrow, and scrub pine, birch, and alders that grow close to it, made an arch overhead. They didn't have any street plows in Old Town then: they used to hitch a short, heavy log behind a sled and let it roll along to break out the road. The best sidewalks were made of planks. The walk on Main Street was fairly wide in the business section, but from the lower and down to Great Works it was only two planks wide, and they were set far enough apart so that people could pass without getting off the planks. Sidewalks that weren't planked were pretty bad when the frost came

[out?] in the spring. The roads were bad, too, at that time of the year, especially in the low places. We used to see teams on Main Street deep in muddy ruts. In the summer the roads were smooth enough, but they were covered, in some places, with just two or three inches deep.

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“My father worked in different saw mills around here. One of them was built right across the river between the lower end of French Island and Old Town. All those rocks that make the current rough there, are what is left of the foundations of that mill. It was burned thirty four years ago. Shad Rips, on the Milford side of the island, got its name from the shad that used to run there. The people used to catch them with seines. The shad don't run there now because they can't get over the dams.

“Where Jordan's Mill is now on Water Street there used to be a small machine shop run by Tim Chapman, the father of Fred. When Chapman moved his business across the river to where it is now, Mose Jordan started to saw “headings” in the former [machine?] shop. Headings are the tops and bottoms of barrels. Across the street, over the store where Morin had his pool room, Strickland and Pearson had a moulding mill. Bill Page was the foreman. Jordan kept increasing the size of his plant until it included a saw mill, a box mill, a casket factory, and a moulding mill. They started making wooden mouldings about the time Strickland and Pearson went out of business.

“If you interviewed Ovide Morin you know that he lives on Bosworth Street, but do you know how it came to be called that? Bosworth is not a French name. Old Charlie Bosworth's father - you remember Charlie, the fellow that had the wooden leg? - used to make caskets over on that street and they named it after him. The caskets he made weren't very fancy affairs: they were made of soft wood and they sold for six or eight dollars. If you wanted something a little better in hardwood, it would cost you a little more. George [Dr per?], I remember, kept a place over there called “The Old Tavern.”

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“Water Street was a pretty wild place after the drives came in. Those drivers used to race down from the head of Indian Island. The redskins had a cannon over there and when that wild gang got in sight the Indians used to fire it off for a signal to the whites. A lot of people used to gather on the shore to watch them land. There were eight in a boat and when those boats hit the landing some of them would go nearly all their length up on the shore. The drivers made for Water Street the first thing, but they had to get by some people, like ‘Humpy’ Mischou first, that were trying to drag them in to sell them suits of clothes. ‘Humpy’ worked for Fred Allen and he was quite a character.

“I've seen free - for - all fights going on on Water Street all the way from the bridge down to the last saloon. Those fellows would get drinks and they'd start to remember words that had passed in the woods. Every word had to be accounted for. About all the police could do was to stand back and let them fight it out.

“I can remember quite a few of these old river men the Sweet boys, Jo Nichols, John Latno - he was Alex,’ the ex-mayor's father. They were around fifty years ago and some of them could do things on logs you wouldn't believe could be done. I've seen Jo Nichols take a ‘clapboard cut’ and spin it end for end in the water, (“Spinning a junk” was described in an article on the boom that I wrote last fall.) A clapboard cut was just a thick log as long as a clapboard. They used to cut clapboards from. The log wasn't rolled in the ordinary way, you understand; they used to spin them end for end. Once they got it started, they'd keep it going.

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“There used to be a saw mill in Great Works. It was right where the company power house is now. I've seen more than one driving boat go through that sluice and strike the white water at the other end. People used to go down there to watch the rafts go through; it was quite a sight. They used to think it was great sport to ride the rafts from Old Town down the river to Bangor. People like the Smiths, the Rogers, and the Hinks, with plenty of money, used to bring lunches down in boxes and board rafts for the sail down river. Nobody

objected, least of all the people who worked on the rafts. It was just good company for them. Going over the dam was where they got their biggest thrill. The rafts, of course, didn't go over the falls: they could have been broken up that way. The boats went down through the sluice, but the rafts went by way of the apron. The main part of the dam dropped off sharply and the current ran pretty fast through the sluice, but the apron sloped down very gradually. It was quite a sight to see the rafts of shipmasts go through. They were about seventy feet long, and of course they had to be rafted lengthwise. They used birch poles in rafting the shipmasts because they had to be careful they didn't break apart. There was a lot of money tied up in one of those rafts.

“It wasn't only logs and shipmasts that were floated down. The sawmills used to make [?] rafts of dimension, and on those they would pile boards and smaller stuff such as clapboards, laths, and bunches of shingles. They were floated down to the docks in Bangor where they were broken up and loaded on to vessels. When the water was high early in the year they could make the rafts bigger and heavier. I've seen them 150 feet long and 50 feet wide. A raft of that size represented a lot of money

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“On the dimension rafts that carried the smaller stuff, they used to bore two holes at the front end and drive in posts that kept an 8x8 from slipping off. This piece of timber ran along the front end and the boards were piled with one end of them resting on that. It had the effect of tipping up the front end. The rafts were steered with sweeps fourteen feet long and tapered up to a point at one end.

“You used to see a lot of logs ‘[hedgehogged?]’ along the shore in the fall. Sometimes there would be as much as 10,000,000 feet ahead. Those [logs?] stayed there all winter, and in the spring the mills used them to run on until the spring drives started to come in. The only drives we see around here now are pulp wood drives. They used to dry all the wood they used here (to make pulp), but now they use the wet stuff, too.

“Speaking of the apron on the dam reminded me of a queer sight any one can take in down near the Veazie Dam. Those sea gulls will alight on the water about fifty feet above the dam and let the current carry them down the runway. Just before they got to the rough water they'll go up in the air and fly back to where they started from. They are like a bunch of kids, sliding. I've stopped a couple of times over on the Bradley road when I was driving down to Bangor to watch them.

“It's funny that I've lived here all my life, but my boys are scattered all over the country. That picture on the wall there is one of Rudolph, my oldest boy. He is in Missouri now working in a varnish plant. He was on a torpedo boat in the navy during the World War. He was over there when the German fleet surrendered to the British. That photograph on the piano is one of my youngest boy: he graduated from the high school last year. This year he is at a 14 CCC camp. When the boys get finally settled, maybe they'll take after me enough to stay put.

“I have belonged to the Catholic Foresters for the last thirty years, and my wife and I have been in the Grange for twenty-five years. When the Knights of Columbus got their charter here I was too old to be anything but a charter member in that so I never joined it. I have a life insurance policy in the Prudential, though.

“Those accordians under the table belong to me and the wife. We played at WLBZ when that station first started and maybe we'd be playing there now if it wasn't so far from home. Accordian music was something of a novelty on the radio then: people liked it. We played at the first Auto Show in Bangor, and whenever the Grange has an entertainment, I guess they'd think it strange if we weren't there to play. Guess I've played the accordian for fifty years. If I gave you a list of the songs we played, it would be a long one. We could probably play all night without having to repeat anything. We always played the music of the day. Those I played fifty years ago were songs such as Over the Waves, Turkey in the

Straw, The Irish Washer-woman , and others of that type. Any music is good if it's played right at the proper time. I like all of it.